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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000276

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SUBJECT: Milinkevich Holds Three Meeting With GOB
Interference, But Little Violence

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Emboffs on March 12 observed three of 10+ Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's meetings with voters in Minsk. Milinkevich's messages in all three gatherings focused on "stability should not equal stagnation," "the elections will not be free and fair," and "vote against self-isolation." Milinkevich and his supporters were denied permission to hold rallies inside government-owned facilities, thus the candidate held the meetings outside. The last (and most widely publicized) March 12 rally attracted approximately 2,500 people. Although there was a large security presence at the gatherings, security services did not attempt to disband or prevent the gatherings from taking place. However, the authorities used loud music and the pro-Lukashenko Belarusian Republican Youth Movement to interfere and provoke the crowd. Two Ukrainian journalists and 15 Ukrainian activists were reportedly arrested following the last meeting. Milinkevich plans to hold similar gatherings on March 16 and 18. End Summary.

First Rally Small with No Interference

¶2. (C) Poloffs on March 12 observed 10+ Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's first rally at 12:00 at the Salut movie theater. The theater, as so many venues have done in the past, denied Milinkevich and his supporters entry, resulting in Milinkevich addressing 400 people on the theater steps with a handheld megaphone. Although the weather was cold and snowy, the crowd - comprised of all ages, but mostly seniors - listened to Milinkevich for a full hour. Milinkevich's speech centered on such themes as "stability should not equal stagnation," "the elections will not be free and fair," and "vote against self-isolation." Pedestrians briefly stopped to listen and some, once they found out it was the opposition, quickly left.

¶3. (C) There was no uniformed police presence, but at least 30 plainclothes security personnel mingled throughout the crowd. Poloffs spotted at least three security forces cameramen on the ground and one on the theater's balcony videotaping all persons present. DATT found two unmarked 30 PAZ buses, normally used by Ministry of Interior Troops (MVD), parked behind the theater and two large metro buses parked three blocks away. Poloffs, however, did not observe any arrests or provocations.

Second Meeting Larger, More Interference

¶4. (C) DATT attended Milinkevich's second meeting with

voters at 15:00 at the Palace of Railroad Workers. Plainclothes officers again were in close proximity to the crowd, but did not interfere. However, the Palace played music loudly over its intercom in an attempt to drown out Milinkevich's speech. A group of Lukashenko supporters, most likely the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), appeared with pro-Lukashenko banners shouting "Za Belarus" (Lukashenko's 2001 campaign slogan "For Belarus") and "Za Batka" (Lukashenko's self-imposed nickname meaning "father" and/or "leader"). Four unmarked 30 PAX buses, one marked Police UAZ-469 Jeep, and the same two metro buses seen at the earlier meeting were parked behind the Palace. DATT did not witness any arrests or violence.

Third Appearance Gathers Large Crowd

15. (C) Poloffs observed Milinkevich's final meeting that took place on the steps of the Ice Palace after the venue refused to allow the candidate and his supporters access. About 2,500 voters, including visiting Ukrainian activists, gathered to listen to Milinkevich, despite two uniformed police officers telling the crowd on loudspeakers that the facility was closed for "hockey practice." Again there was a large plainclothes security presence. Uniformed police blocked vehicle access to the parking lot and discouraged pedestrians from approaching the Ice Palace, again claiming it was closed for hockey practice. Poloffs and DATT counted one UAZ-469 Jeep with MVD license plates, the same two metro buses seen at the earlier meetings, and five MVD 30 PAX buses (two empty and two occupied by uniformed troops) parked behind the Palace. [Comment: According to DATT, these troops wore blue camouflage, differentiating themselves from the solid-color uniforms worn by the

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regular MVD militia troops.] After listening to the radio chatter coming from a nearby security officer's radio, Poloffs learned that security services stopped a Milinkevich vehicle carrying placards.

16. (C) Two large Ukrainian flags, one Belarusian nationalist white-red-white flag, a denim flag, and several small EU flags appeared. Twenty minutes into the meeting, a double column of young men (about 30 in number) marched from around the back of the Palace into the center of the crowd and unfurled two large, professionally done banners with slogans "No Color Revolutions" and "Milinkevich Q No, Lukashenko Q Yes." A dozen plainclothes officers Poloffs had been observing joined the Lukashenko supporters. They chanted the slogans "Za Belarus" and "Za Batka," to which Milinkevich's supporters chanted loudly "Milinkevich" and "Live Belarus." Milinkevich cited the incident as another GOB-sponsored provocation and asked his supporters not to respond. Some members of Milinkevich's crowd began throwing snowballs at the Lukashenko supporters.

17. (C) At the end of his speech, Milinkevich supporters escorted him to his van. Several of the young Milinkevich supporters accused the Lukashenko supporters of being BRCM members and, noticing some of their accents, called them "kolkhozniki" (collective farm workers, or rudely, "peasants").

Ukrainian Activists and Journalists Detained

18. (C) Poloffs did not witness any arrests or violence, but according to human rights NGO and online news source Charter 97, plainclothes officers detained Ukrainian Channel 5 journalist Anna Gorozhenko and cameraman Leonid Leonidov as soon as they were to begin a live broadcast. Up to 15 members of the Ukrainian Students' Brotherhood and their leader Oleg Yatsenko were allegedly beaten and detained following the meeting. After the Ukrainian Embassy intervened, journalist Gorozhenko and Leonidov were

released later in the evening. On March 13, five of the detained Ukrainians were sentenced to 10 days in jail for participating in an unauthorized demonstration and disorderly conduct. Two Belarusians were arrested and sentenced to 10 days for the same charge and fined USD 290 for "petty hooliganism. The rest of the Ukrainians have not yet been charged.

Comment

¶ 9. (C) The President and the GOB have repeatedly stressed that they will not allow unsanctioned and "illegal" public gatherings in the run up to the elections. In addition, the GOB has implemented a variety of measures to keep the opposition rallies relatively small, but the candidates have not yet been prevented from holding rallies. The Milinkevich team plans to hold more meetings with voters in Minsk and the regions on March 17 and March 18.

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